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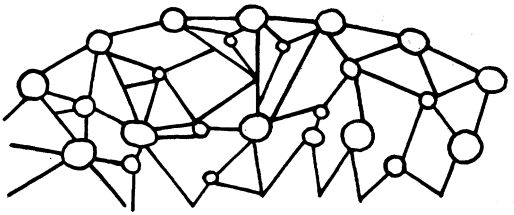
entangled in the lines and go wandering from circle to circle like lost souls amongst the stars.

This done he began the service.

A Voodoo ritual.



A quotation sent by Lady Russell from Barbados.

AGRELL'S "MAGICO-NUMERICAL" THEORY OF THE RUNES

A CRITIQUE of Professor Sigurd Agrell's "magico-numerical" theory of the runes can most conveniently be expressed in the form of a review of his *Senantik mysteriereligion och nordisk runmagi*.[1] He has elaborated his theory several times elsewhere [2] but nowhere so explicitly as in this book. The book is admittedly semi-popular and this entails certain disadvantages (notably the rather inadequate documentation).

Before we attempt any estimate of the probability of the theory it will be necessary to indicate very briefly the present state of runological studies.

The origin of the Germanic runic alphabet—an alphabet of obviously European type arranged in an order strikingly different to that of any other—affords a problem still unsolved.

[1] Stockholm (Bonnier), 1931 ; pp. 277.

[2] "Runornas talmystik och dess antika förebild," *Skrifter utgivna av Vetenskaps-Societeten i Lund*, vol. VI (1927) ; "Zur Frage nach dem Ursprung der Runennamen," *id.*, vol. X (1928) ; "Studier i senantik bokstavsmystik," *Eranos*, xxvi 1 ff. (1928) ; "Rökstenens chiffergåtor och andra runologiska problem," *Kungl. humanistiska vetenskapssamfundet i Lund, Årsberättelse* 1929-30, III ; "Die spätantike Alphabetmystik und die Runenreihe," *id.*, 1931-32, VI ; *Lapptrummor och runmagi*, 1934 (in which it is also suggested that the magic signs on the Lappish divination-drums are due to runic influence).

Three chief subjects arise for discussion: (1) the letter-forms, (2) the characteristic order, (3) the rune-names.

There are to-day three main theories as to the origin of the rune-forms: (A) that the runes originated from the Latin lapidary alphabet,[3] (B) that they originated among the Goths round the Black Sea from a mixture of Greek and Latin letter-forms either lapidary[4] or cursive,[5] (C) that they originated among the South Germans from the Alpine-Celtic alphabets, which may concisely be described as North Etruscan alphabets undergoing gradual Latinisation.[6] To all these three theories there are both advantages and disadvantages and it is safe to say that, to-day, anyone who ventures to form his own opinion as to the relative merits of the three must be a specialist in the four relevant epigraphies—Runic, Latin, Etruscan and Greek.

Much more work has been done on the rune-forms than on the other two problems, the order and the names. Marstrander, it is true, has attempted an explanation (*loc. cit.*) but it is so little plausible that no good purpose can be served by summarising it here.

The chief merit of Agrell's runological work is that, whatever we may think of his conclusions, he has elaborated (with a great deal of learning) a line of approach to the problem which, in that it concentrates on the order and the names rather than on the rune-forms, is strikingly new.

After a short introductory chapter Agrell proceeds, in Chapter II of the book under review, to an account of the cults of the late antique. He describes those of the *Magna Mater*, Isis (with some account of magic of the late Egyptian type, particularly the Sethic black magic), the *Dea Syria*, Jupiter Dolichenus, and the Baalim. He devotes considerable space to Mithraism and suggests that the Germans came into contact with the flourishing

[3] L. F. A. Wimmer, *Die Runenschrift*; H. Pedersen, *Aarbøger for nordisk Oldkyndighed og Historie*, 1923, p. 37 ff.

[4] S. Bugge, *Norges indskrifter med de ældre runer.*

[5] O. von Friesen, *Om runskriftens härkomst* and again *Arkiv for nordisk filologi*, 1931, p. 80 ff.

[6] Marstrander, *Norsk tidsskrift for Sprogvidenskap*, i, 85 ff.; Hammarström, *Studier i nordisk filologi*, vol. XX, no. 1.

Mithraism of Dacia and Moesia. He further calls attention to some points of Eddaic mythology which he would ascribe (not very plausibly) to Mithraic influence.

His third chapter is devoted to a description of the astrology of the late antique which influenced Mithraism considerably. He attempts to show (again not very plausibly) that the Eddaic poem Grímnismál, which recounts the heavenlv seats of the gods, betrays the influence of this astrology.

The next two chapters deal with alphabetic magic. An example will serve to make Agrell's method clear.

There is a catacomb-inscription reading:

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+          +          +          X
                      +
           PAX        A
ABCDEGKFLMN           +     ABCDETS
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If we give to each letter its ordinal number in the alphabet ($a=1$, $b=2$, etc.) and add up the values found for each group of letters we find: PAX $=15+1+21=37$; similarly, ABCDEGKFLMN $=74=2\times 37$; TS $=37$; ABCDE, A, X $=37$. The whole total $=185=5\times 37$. According to Agrell the repeated occurrences of the number 37 (=PAX) are striking (cf. also the Greek magic formula *ΧΜΓ* which also "adds up" to 37); the number 5 is important in Christian magic (cf. the "five wounds of Christ").

In Chapter IV a new (and plausible) solution of the famous numerical cryptograms in the Apocalypse is offered and in Chapter V a number of Latin and Greek examples of alphabetic magic (similar to the one given above but in general not so convincing) are dealt with. Some of these are of Mithraic and Sethic character.

Chapter VI deals with the "Pergamum-Bowl." This is a divination-bowl of *c.* 200 A.D. It consists of a disc covered with magic signs. Towards its outer edge are three concentric circles divided by eight symmetrical radii, thus giving twenty-four compartments, while its central portion is divided into eight sectors. Each compartment of the disc is filled with a number

of magic signs and many of these are obviously Greek letters. We now come to a central point in Agrell's theory: on the Pergamum-Bowl we have a division of the twenty-four letters of the Greek alphabet into three sets of eight for purposes which are obviously magical and we also have this same division of twenty-four letters into three sets of eight (*ættir*) in the Germanic runic alphabet. Agrell suggests that this similarity is not due to chance, but to the fact that the disrupted order apparent in the runic alphabet is due to a rearrangement of the letters for magical purposes modelled on something very like the Pergamum-bowl. He then proceeds to correlate the contents of the individual compartments of the disc with the Germanic runes, taken in order. One example must suffice to illustrate his method. In the second compartment there appears a fish. Many of the magic signs on the disc resemble debased Egyptian hieroglyphs and Agrell suggests that this fish is ultimately the hieroglyph meaning "disgust"; a fish was used in the late antique worship of Isis to indicate something demonic, evil. Now in Agrell's runic alphabet the second rune (the third according to the normal arrangement—see below) is the *thurs*-rune (cf. Anglo-Saxon *þyrs* "demon"); moreover, the number 2 is connected in Germanic folklore, in late antique mysticism and in oriental magic with something demonic.

Of this link in the theory it may be said that it depends on the strength of the individual correlations; on the whole these are not very convincing (see further below). Moreover, the coincidence that strikes Agrell as so surprising—that in both the Pergamum-bowl and the runic alphabet we have a division of 24 letters into 3 sets of 8—is surely not at all surprising; there are only two convenient ways of dividing 24: 3×8 or 4×6 (for 2×12 would give too large groups).

In chs. VII, VIII and IX, the author devotes himself more particularly to the runes themselves, discussing their origin and names, and, in much greater detail, their magical implication. In ch. VII, at considerable length, he gives his reasons for disagreeing with the so-called "western" theories of Marstrander and Pedersen. It will, of course, be obvious to the reader that Agrell's "magical" theory is incompatible with them both.

That one of the chief purposes of the runic alphabet was to cast spells, bringing good fortune or evil to the person against whom they were directed, is an accepted fact. When the runes are mentioned in Old Norse literature, it nearly always stresses their magical properties. It is, for instance, by the power of runes, cut in a piece of drift-wood, that death comes to Grettir the Strong on the island of Drangey, and equally by their power that Egill Skallagrímsson heals a dying woman in Värmland. Even the word *rúnar*, besides meaning "runic letters," is freely used to imply "mysteries," "secrets"; a meaning which is well supported by other Germanic dialects.

It is well known, too, that numbers played a significant part in the application of magic during heathen times in Scandinavia, though the value of individual numbers remains obscure. Some of them were undoubtedly believed to be sacred, or, at least, endowed with peculiar power. We read that the prophetess, to whom *Vǫluspá* is attributed, remembered nine worlds, and that Óðinn learned nine magic songs from the son of *Bǫlþor*.

Similar examples could be multiplied, and a particularly interesting feature of Prof. Agrell's book is that he makes a scholarly attempt to unite the runes with numerical magic. In addition, however, to the examples which he gives of the use of runes and numbers, we may mention another which shows how closely the two were related. In the *Hávamál* (138-139), we read that Óðinn hung for nine nights on the tree Yggdrasill or "Óðinn's horse," and, at the end of that time, he peered down and discovered runes. In this passage, more clearly than in any other, we see how closely the runes were bound up with numerical magic, and it is unfortunate that the author did not take it into account in the work which we discuss.

Many of the extant runic inscriptions, it is true, spell words, which give an easily soluble meaning, but there are others, for which no philological explanation is possible. They may consist of a row, shall we say, of eight *a*-runes, or of apparently meaningless words like *ækosœri* or *tuwatuwa*. It is in such cases as these that Agrell is best able to apply his theories of numerical magic, and, it will be agreed, his results are often remarkable.

In the author's opinion, runic magic is nothing more than a Germanic development of the alphabetical and numerical cults, which were derived from the east, and practised so ardently during the late antique period. Each rune is, therefore, said to have a numerical value according to its position in the alphabet, and its mystical significance corresponds to the late antique beliefs. In their names, all of which are substantival, Agrell sees symbols of religious veneration.

It is unfortunate, however, that the conventional order of the *fuþark*, or runic alphabet, provides no satisfactory clue. It is, therefore, necessary to make some alteration. Only by removing the initial *f*-rune to the end of the alphabet, is it found possible to achieve positive results, and it is on this suggestion that a great part of Agrell's theory must stand. Thus, the runes *u-þ-a* are put in the order of 1-2-3, and on this basis their magical meaning is discussed.

It will be noticed that the author finds it hard to substantiate his theory of *uþark*, as opposed to *fuþark*, for it can hardly be said that any direct evidence is available. Such evidence as the runes themselves provide is found on the Kylver stone, which was discovered in Gottland, and is said to date from the beginning of the fifth century. This inscription, then, gives the earliest runic alphabet which is in any way complete.

Unlike other inscriptions of the same nature, however, it does not begin in the usual way with an *f*-rune. Instead, the first rune consists of a perpendicular line, which, formally, can be no other than *i*-, although *i*- recurs in its established place in the alphabet. After this initial sign, the inscription continues *u-þ-a-r-k*, etc., and though there are slight irregularities, both of order and form, it is only the last rune of the series which remains unsolved.

This is a complex twig-rune of the fir-tree type, and is composed of a perpendicular stroke, with six twigs on the left and eight on the right. Accordingly, it should be the eighth rune of the sixth *ætt* or group of eight. Since, however, the original runic alphabet consists of only 24 signs, which were commonly divided into three *ættir*, it is hard to decipher this final symbol. The author, therefore, suggests the following solution. The

runic alphabet was commonly written in the order beginning *f-u-þ-a-r-k*, as it is, with slight modification on the Vadstena bracteat, the Thames sword, and in the runic poems. In addition, however, it is suggested that there was another order, used for magical purposes, and therefore known only to the initiated. In this order, the series began *u-þ-a-r-k*, and the rune *f-*, which was normally written first, now came at the end, and had the numerical value of 24.

The final rune on the Kylver stone is, therefore, said to be *f* cryptically expressed. For the magician, who was acquainted with both orders of the alphabet, wishing to use the *uþark* order, would count first the three *ættir* of the *fuþark*, giving three strokes on the left. Subsequently he would give the *ætt* to which his rune belonged according to the *uþark* sequence by adding further strokes on the left. Accordingly, the first three strokes on the left apply only to the three *ættir* of the *fuþark*, but every additional stroke on that side indicates an *ætt* according to the *uþark* order. Therefore, the eighth rune of the sixth *ætt* can be no other than *f-*.

Apart from any epigraphical problems which the Kylver stone may present, it must be felt that, on this point, the theory has been extremely hard pressed. For, though there need be little doubt that the first rune is *i-*, there is only strained evidence to show that the magician intended *f-* to be read in this cryptic cypher at the end.

If, however, we are prepared to accept the author's numerical theories, and willing to associate the runes with the numerical and alphabetical magic of the East, we will find that the Kylver inscription allows of striking interpretation.

Prepared for a grave, it is indeed appropriate that the alphabet should be preceded by *i*, for the rune *i* is number ten of the *uþark*, and that number is said to imply death. Its name *íss* (" ice ") is readily associated with Hel and with the cold of Niflheim. We are reminded too, that when Egill Skallagrímsson came to the sick woman in Värmland (*Egilssaga*, ch. LXXII), he discovered that her failure to recover was due to a whale-bone, lying in her bed, on which *ten* runes were inscribed. The argument is richly supported with examples drawn both from

Scandinavia and the east (see also the author's *Lapptrummor*, pp. 39 f.).

If added together, the 24 runes which follow the initial *íss* amount to 300, and, therefore, the total of the whole series is 310, or 31 × 10. If, following Agrell's system, we add up the six runes on the right, spelling the unsolved word *sulius*, we find that their value is 62, which again is 31 × 2. The total number of runes on the stone is 25 plus 6 or 31. This number 31, being a prime number, is said to have anti-demonic properties. Accordingly, the predominating numbers of the whole inscription are the anti-demonic 31 and the death number 10. It is, therefore, said to have had the dual purpose of binding the dead man to his grave, and keeping demons at bay.

It is on this principle that Prof. Agrell attempts both to interpret the inscriptions and to explain the rune names. The first rune of the alphabet, according to the author's *uþark* theory, is *u*. In the Old English runic poem, this rune is called *ūr* or "aurochs"; a name which offers striking analogy to the Greek *alpha*, derived from a Semitic word meaning "ox" (cf. Hebrew *āleph*). According both to Mithraism and to the religion of Zoroaster, the bull was said to be the first in organic creation, and by the Egyptians, the bull's horns were used as a symbol of the beginning.

The second rune is called in O.E. *þorn* ("thorn"), and in O.N. *þurs*, a word meaning "troll," "demon." In this case, it is maintained, the Scandinavian name is the more original, for, according both to western and oriental superstition, 2 is the evil number. Attention is drawn to the expression *den andre* or "the second," meaning "the evil one," said to be still current in Skåne, and to the philosophy of Zoroaster, which said that the second was the evil, or unreal principle of life. In addition to the examples he gives, the author will, no doubt, have noticed the following words of Skírnir, as he utters threats against Freyr's reluctant lover Gerðr:

"þurs ríst ek þér ok þrjá stafi,
ergi ok œði ok óþola."

These lines may be rendered: "I shall engrave *þurs* for thee, and three rune-staves, lewdness and rage and impatience."

Although this statement is obscure, we may, at any rate, suggest that the first half-line supports Agrell's opinion.

Among the most interesting of the author's explanations of rune-names is *áss* or "god." The number 3 is readily associated with the Christian trinity, and also with "The Three-figured," a name for Mithras. It is also reminiscent of the three manifestations of Óðinn in *Gylfaginning*, called *Hárr*, *Jafnhárr* and *þriði* or "High," "Equally High" and "Third."

The 11th or *j*-rune is called, in Icelandic, *ár*, which probably means "harvest," and, therefore, that rune and number may be said to symbolise fertility, and are associated with the god Freyr. We are reminded that on behalf of Freyr, Skírnir offers Gerðr 11 golden apples.

The 13th rune, in O.E. *ēoh* "yew," is naturally associated with Ullr, who dwelt in Ýdalir ("Yew-dales"), and was said to be so skilled in archery.

Illuminating as these discussions are, the sceptical reader may often feel cause for disquiet. As an example, let us take the 15th rune of the *uþark*. As its Norse name *sól* would suggest, it is associated with the sun. Examples from oriental religions, however, to show that the number 15 was particularly sacred to the sun, are few and indefinite. Accordingly, we are shown a picture of Helios in his chariot, with a circle of fifteen rays around his head. From Old Norse sources, the evidence would seem to be still less convincing, so our attention is drawn to the 15th of Óðinn's magic songs (*i.e. Hávamál* strophe 160). In that strophe, among other cryptic expressions, we find one "before Delling's door," for which the interpretation "at sunrise" has been suggested. In other respects, it would seem remarkable that the author so rarely alludes to Óðinn's 18 songs, and that they should so seldom support his theory. It will be agreed, however, that as Agrell shows, their total number, 18, is not unreasonably associated with Óðinn.

In the final chapter, Agrell applies his alphabetical magic to numerous unsolved inscriptions. As an example, let us consider his investigation of the Lindholm amulet from Skåne. On it, we read the apparently meaningless runes :

aaaaaaaaRRRnnnʔbmuttt:alu:

The 15th sign is damaged and illegible, and accordingly, Prof. Agrell supplies a fourth *n*, which supports his own theory. The numerical value of the 8 *a*-runes at the beginning is 24 (3×8), while the last three runes, which spell *alu* and form a separate group, also amount to 24. The second group from the end, comprising three *t*'s, has the value of 48, which is 2×24. If the five dots are counted, each as one, the total value of the inscription is 216 or 9×24.

It is maintained, accordingly, that the number 9, to which magical properties are always ascribed, is combined with 24, representing the last rune of the alphabet or *f*. This rune is called *fé* or "wealth," and the inscription is, therefore, said to imply the fulfilment of a wish for wealth. In addition, it is pointed out that the number of runic signs on the whole inscription, excluding the 5 dots, is again 24.

More complicated and yet more striking are Agrell's conclusions on the runic horn from Gallehus. This well-known inscription reads:

ekhlewagastiR ⁝ holtijaR ⁝ horna ⁝ tawido ⁝

Although the words may be simply rendered: "I HlewagastiR from Holt made this horn," the author sees in them a magical meaning as well. It will be noticed that the first group *ek HlewagastiR* consists of thirteen runes whose numerical total is 143 or 11×13. The second group amounts to 104 which is 8×13, and, if the 16 dots are counted with it, the whole inscription has a total of 390 or 30×13.

The number 13 would seem to predominate in the inscription, and this number, as we were told in a previous chapter, belongs to the bow-god Ullr, for the 13th rune is called *ēoh* or "yew."

In his investigation of the horn, the author does not confine himself to the runes alone, but considers the drawings on it as well. In its uppermost section are 7 sharply drawn figures, of which 4 are men and 3 beasts. Scattered among them are 7 fainter figures of beasts, and among the 25 stars are 7, with 7 points. We remember that the 7th rune has the O.E. name *wynn* or "joy."

We are once more reminded of Ullr by a figure on the second

section of the horn, depicting an archer standing beneath 3 stars. The total number of their points is 26 or 2×13. This figure perhaps contains an allusion to Ullr's position as an astral deity.

It is certainly remarkable that, on entirely different grounds, the Swedish runologist Ivar Lindquist also arrived at the conclusion that the Gallehus horn was to be associated with Ullr (see *Namn och Bygd*, 1926, pp. 82 foll.). Nevertheless, it may be stated that the engraving includes many other points, both of frieze and of stars, besides numerous figures which might deserve to be counted and added up.

The same chapter of the present work contains a detailed discussion of the Thames sword. The four new runes, peculiar to Old English, are given the value of 25-28, and the predominating number on this inscription is found to be 17. This number is said to correspond to the *b*-rune, called *bjarkan* in Icelandic, which is supposed to symbolize the birch-tree and fertility.

Summarizing, we may say that the underlying idea of Agrell's theory—that the distorted order of the runic alphabet is primarily magical, and that certain runic inscriptions are of purely magical significance—is very plausible. The details of the late antique connection, however, as worked out by him, still remain rather unconvincing.

E. O. G. TURVILLE-PETRE.
A. S. C. ROSS.